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KT photo | **Tim Bath**
Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor

House of Burgess: Author, professor, book smuggler

Tony Diaz is a pusher of contraband words

By Rob Burgess
Tribune columnist

By day, Tony Diaz is an author and professor who serves as director of intercultural initiatives at Lone Star College in Houston. But two years ago, he donned another title: smuggler. During Spring Break 2012, he and his compatriots crossed two state lines to distribute \$20,000 worth of contraband to the youth of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona.

But what they transported wasn't drugs. (Although, you'd never know it from the way local officials there treated it.) Rather, Diaz became a self-described el librotraficante.

Literally translated, he was a "book smuggler."

"The irony is, if you look at a lot of Chicano literature, it's about crossing the border, but they talk about the border of Mexico," he told me in a phone interview Sunday. "You don't read a lot about people crossing state line borders."

Diaz and the group he founded in 1998, Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say, felt called to undertake this six-city tour that ended in Tucson, Arizona, and saw the founding of four underground libraries. To understand the origins of the trip, start with an open letter written June 11, 2007, by Tom Horne, Arizona's superintendent of public instruction.

"Ethnic studies in the Tucson Unified School District teaches a kind of destructive ethnic chauvinism that the citizens of Tucson should no longer tolerate," he wrote.

Horne's disdain led directly to the creation of Arizona House Bill 2281, which was signed into law May 11, 2010, by Gov. Jan Brewer.

"A school district or charter school in this state shall not include in its program of instruction any courses or classes that include: Promote the

overthrow of the U.S. government; promote resentment toward a race or class of people; are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group; or advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals,” read the bill.

In January 2012, new law in hand, Horne successfully pressured the Tucson school district to drop its Mexican American Studies program and ban the 84 books that comprised its curriculum, including: William Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” (What?!) and Howard Zinn’s “A People’s History of the United States.”

As I wrote in my Aug. 8, 2013 column, “A People’s History of Mitch Daniels,” and my Sept. 18, 2013 column, “Read a banned book,” it was revealed by Tom LoBianco of The Associated Press current Purdue University President Mitch Daniels also targeted Zinn’s classic during his tenure as governor. Like Daniels, conservative leaders in nearby states have taken note of Arizona’s tactics and moved forward.

“A new conservative school board majority here in the Denver suburbs recently proposed a curriculum-review committee to promote patriotism, respect for authority and free enterprise and to guard against educational materials that ‘encourage or condone civil disorder,’” reported Jack Healy of The New York Times Sept. 23. “Hundreds of students from high schools across the Jefferson County school district ... streamed out of school and

along busy thoroughfares, waving signs and championing the value of learning about the fractious and tumultuous chapters of American history.”

And in Texas, Diaz said his fellow idea language dealers were protesting House Bills 1128 and 1938, which they say mimic Arizona’s law.

A lawsuit filed in response to the Tucson school district’s deletions, *Arce v. Huppenthal*, is now before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. In solidarity, Diaz is conducting a Twitter campaign to coincide with Banned Books Week. Starting Sept. 23 and running through today, Diaz will tweet another book banned by the Tucson school district every hour from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. using the hashtag #MASBannedBooksWeek. (Visit www.librotraficante.com/annotatedBibliography.pdf to see the whole list.)

“I would have been happy and fulfilled running a nonprofit, writing and teaching here in Texas,” Diaz told me. “Now they’ve basically helped inspire this national movement.”

When books are banned anywhere, it’s a threat everywhere. Take a page from Diaz and smuggle one of these outlawed texts into your head.

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